

Speech by the Speaker of the House Jimmy Naifeh
to the Tennessee House of Representatives
Opening Day of Session
January 12, 1999

Speaker pro-tem DeBerry. Majority Leader Hargrove. Minority Leader McDaniel. To my distinguished colleagues who have served before in this Chamber and to those members who are here for the very first time. To my wife Betty, my son Jim, my daughter Beth and her husband Joe, and my daughter Sameera and her husband Brunswick. To all of you here today. And especially to my dad, Mr. Oney.

Thank you, members of the 101st General Assembly, for the honor of allowing me to serve the great state of Tennessee as the Speaker of the House of Representatives. I appreciate your friendship, I appreciate your support, and I appreciate the confidence you have placed in me. I value your opinions and I believe in your abilities. It is a privilege to serve with you.

Just eight short days ago, the men's football team from the University of Tennessee made history; a team made up of some very fine young men completed what can truly be called a memorable run through a season, capping it off by being named the best in the country. Certainly for true Big Orange fans, it was a day that will always be remembered. For most everyone else in the State, I hope that the victory caused you to at least feel some sense of pride in the accomplishments of the students of one of our state universities. Winning the national championship means you are the best; the Lady Vols can certainly tell you that and the sun shines a little brighter (maybe a little more orange, too), the air is a little sweeter, the sky is a little bluer.

What is wrong with being the best? Nothing.

What is wrong with the citizens of this State having the best health care options? What is wrong with Tennessee being known nationally for its efforts to prevent crime? What is wrong with Tennessee striving to have the best educational opportunities for our children?

There is nothing wrong with any of those goals.

By running for office, you here today have chosen to participate in the governance of the State of Tennessee. You are here today because you want to be here. And because the people who live and vote in your districts want you to be here as well.

And, I would believe, that you are here because you want only the best for the citizens of the State.

You have joined a team that has great responsibilities. A team that was sent here to work hard and to do what is right.

I have been impressed with how this body, the House of Representatives, has worked hard in the last several sessions to function without unnecessary gridlock, to work in a cooperative spirit, and to pass what this membership feels is best for the State. We do, at times, have partisan disputes, but those are few and far between. When it comes to what is best for the citizens, we work together to get things done.

We welcome ten new members today to this body. Today truly begins a new chapter in your lives. Every time you vote, you are representing over fifty thousand people. Be careful how you reach your decisions on issues. Take the time to make sure you understand the matters being discussed. You should also use the resource tools that are available to you. We have, in the past few years, upgraded our staff in order to provide the membership with new and improved research capabilities; we also have one of the finest legal services divisions anywhere in the country. These folks are here to help you. Take advantage of their talents and abilities; it will help make you a better legislator.

The General Assembly also voted last year to provide the membership with computer capability at your desk and from your offices. This capability is meant to provide you with quick access to relevant information concerning legislation. You will have immediate access to the Tennessee Code, fiscal information about a proposed bill, pre-filed amendments, and other relevant information. Learn how to use these tools effectively; we talk about being in an ever-changing world of technology--well, it has finally caught up with the General Assembly.

I would also encourage you to work at getting along with each other. Good relationships are very important here in helping to get things done. I have always felt that if you sit down and discuss matters with each other, you have a much better chance of getting something accomplished.

We have a great deal of work to do. It is time to get down to business.

To begin with, I, as Speaker, will be implementing one important procedural change this year. We have heard complaints for years about the length of session, the large number of bills that are held until the end of session, as well as the large number of bills filed in general. I asked staff to look over this issue during the past year to see if we could come up with a more efficient way of operating.

After reviewing the information from staff, it appears that maybe the number of bills isn't necessarily the problem but the delay in getting the bills before us is. Too many of our bills are rolled over and over again causing large calendars at the end of our session; too many of our bills are never put on notice until very late. Subcommittees are slow in shutting down which in turn causes our full committees to have to wait to complete their business. I am, therefore, forming a committee made up of the Majority and Minority Leaders, along with the two Caucus Chairs, the Speaker Pro Tem and myself which will meet after the bill filing date and after all bills have been assigned to their respective subcommittees, to set time limits on how long the subcommittees will be open. For example, if it turns out that the Industrial Impact Subcommittee has fifty bills assigned to it, we might assign that Subcommittee five weeks to complete their business. The same would go for other subcommittees as well. This would cut down on the number of times a bill could be rolled. It would also force the membership to put their bills on notice.

This is obviously a change from how we have done business in the past. But if we are to be the best we can possibly be as a body, we have to be willing to change to become more efficient.

I have also asked staff to implement a system to make the House of Representatives more people-friendly. If you notice today, this session is being broadcast outside the chamber. Staff is working on ways to provide live broadcasts of session, either through a television hookup or through the internet, allowing people all across the State to follow the Legislature.

We are also working on new brochures and pamphlets that will soon be available outside the Committee hearing rooms. These guides will provide important information to citizens about how the House functions, along with relevant information about how to contact your Representative and how to go about testifying before a committee.

It is important to me that we change with the times. As we approach the new millenium, we have to continue to seek ways that will make us the best representative democracy we can be.

The new millenium brings excitement and in many ways a new hope for a better and brighter tomorrow. But as I look towards the new century, I am also reminded that many of the issues that were relevant at the turn of the last century are still relevant today. I would like to talk about four such issues: health care, safety, our children, and the State's economy.

We have all heard the concerns expressed by our citizens about the need for choice in long term health care. As people live longer, the need for more services becomes apparent. It is important to acknowledge the role that nursing homes have played for so many years in dealing with folks who need long term care. But as more and more people reach that age where they must begin looking at long term needs, many citizens are indicating that they would rather receive care at home.

In many circumstances, the choice to stay home may, in fact, be cheaper for many people, as well as for the State. That is a fact that cannot be ignored. Tennessee currently ranks right next to the bottom in terms of State spending on long term home and community health care. That is not something that we in the State should be proud of. Tennesseans all across this State are asking that we provide the mechanisms to give them a choice in the matter. And I believe that we should listen to them.

People change and their needs change. We must be willing to address those changes and work to accomplish what the citizens want. Long term home and community health care options must be addressed this year. We need to give our citizens the best possible choices in long term care.

Another issue that needs immediate attention is the TennCare program, both the initial health care aspect and the mental health part. I read stories where TennCare seems to be having trouble; it is such a complicated program, however, that it is difficult to understand just where all the problems are. It is the responsibility of the Ad Hoc Committee on TennCare to monitor this program. I am today calling on that Committee to begin an immediate review of the whole program to make sure that we are proceeding in the right direction. I know that there is a current study by the Comptroller's Office in the works; I am asking, however, that the Ad Hoc Committee, co-chaired by Rep. Doug Jackson, start now.

When TennCare was first created, it was considered by many people in this country to be one of, if not the best program in the country, in dealing with the Medicaid population. We owe it to the people of this State who need this Program as well as to the citizens who pay for it to make sure that it is in proper working order; to make sure that it is the best program available for serving folks on Medicaid as well as the uninsurable population.

Based upon what I have read, it appears that crime rates are dropping across the State.

In many ways, the credit for that drop goes to the dedicated individuals who work as law enforcement officers. I applaud their efforts; they are to be commended for the outstanding work they do. But just because the crime rate drops does not mean that our work is done. We must continue to find ways to stop crimes from ever occurring. More police protection is one answer. Last year, the General Assembly passed the Safe Neighborhoods Act which provided funds for local communities to hire more police officers. The response has been phenomenal. I call on this body to fund again the Safe Neighborhoods Act and to continue in our efforts to make our streets safe. The same holds true for the funds allocated for the Safe Schools Act--those funds are being used all across the State to help make our schools safer for our young people.

But we should and have to do more. The best time to stop a crime is before it ever happens. We spend huge sums of State taxpayer money on locking prisoners up--and as long as there are violent offenders, we must. But the problem with that whole notion is that the money is being spent after the crime has already occurred--after someone or something has already been hurt. That unfortunately is too late for the victims.

I am today calling upon the Department of Children Services to provide to both the House Committee on Children and Family Affairs and the Select Committee on Children and Youth a simple, straightforward report, no later than February 15, 1999, indicating what moneys are being spent on intervention programs for young people in Tennessee and how successful those programs appear to be. I then want those Committees to report to the entire body as to steps this Legislature can take to make some of these programs more successful. We must do everything within our power to stop crimes before they ever occur. If intervening with young people can help reduce crime, then we ought to do it. We need to make Tennessee the best state in the nation both when it comes to protecting its citizens and reducing crime.

Our children and their future must always be an issue for us to consider. There is no reason, for example, that we can't provide our children with the best in public education. We just finished putting over a billion new dollars into our schools through the full funding of the Basic Education Program--and yet we still hear stories of inadequate computer facilities and classrooms with no heat or air conditioning. I am not sure of how large a problem we have, but I think we owe it to the citizens of this State to find out. I am therefore calling on our Education Committee to work with Commissioner Walters and the Department of Education to conduct a statewide check on our K-12 schools to determine what legitimate problems we still have existing in our schools.

Another area of concern regarding children is the foster care program. Commissioner Hattaway, who I have great respect for, has stated that there is a problem with Tennessee's foster care system. It takes, in many instances, real courage to stand up before a Legislative Committee and admit that there are problems. But there may be nothing worse in our society than a child who cannot find love and care in a family. These children, when placed in foster care, must be given the chance to succeed, whether through being reunited with their family or being adopted by a new family. I want these kids to have the best opportunity to be loved. And we as a body should not stop until we know that a system is in place to provide the best opportunity for that. I am therefore appointing a five member special task force to go out and find what is happening within the foster care program and then seek out solutions to make the system work. I am appointing Rep. Page Walley as Chairman to lead that study, along with the following members:

Butch Lewis
Beth Halteman Harwell

Mary Pruitt
Joe Kent

I expect the Committee to start immediately and to report back no later than March 31, 1999.

Many of you may have noticed this past year that you as well as your constituents spent many hours sitting on the interstates. That is bad for your constituents and it is also bad for this state's economy. Many members of the public as well as many members of the House could not understand why traffic was being delayed or brought to a complete standstill when no work was being done. It appeared to them that there were a lot of barrels blocking open lanes of traffic with not much roadwork activity. Is this the best our transportation system can be?

Roads are vital to this state's economy. They keep commerce flowing, allow people to get to and from their jobs, and they accommodate new businesses that want to locate in Tennessee. Yet we don't seem to get much help from our own Department of Transportation. They may show you a lot of numbers on paper, but it may be more fluff than substance.

Then I hear from my own County Executive that new money coming from the federal government can't be shared with local communities for their roads because DOT just cannot seem to spare the funds. Yet, DOT takes in over \$1.2 billion dollars each year for its operation. That is close to 10% of the entire state budget. I would hope that there are plenty of funds available for needed road improvements; I, along with many of you, attempted to make sure of that when we sponsored and helped pass the bill that provides for our "pay as you go" road program.

We get gripes every year from people all over the State that they cannot get responses from DOT on railroad crossings, on flood damages caused by road construction, on projects that appear to be promised but never occur.

My friends, government is here to serve the people not work against them. We, as Government, need to listen more to the people we serve than attempt to always supply them with answers.

The roadbuilders in this State do a great job for us. Our completed roads are great, better than in many states I have been in. But something does not seem to be right at DOT.

I am hereby appointing a Special Ad Hoc Committee made up of Representative Tommy Head (who will serve as Chairman), Frank Buck, Charlie Curtiss, Dennis Roach, and Ronnie Davis to review the structure of the Department, the way they set up their priorities, and their overall budget. I want to know where they spend their money, and who decides how it is spent. We have a responsibility as the overseers of the taxpayer's money to make sure that it is not being wasted. I want to make sure it is being spent for the benefit of our citizens.

I am asking the Comptrollers Office and our Legislative Budget office to work with the Ad Hoc Committee in conducting this full review of the Department of Transportation. I have heard in the past that some of that information has been difficult to obtain--I am calling on the Commissioner of Transportation to give his full assurance that all records and information will be made open to these folks so that can they do their jobs.

Our roads are vital to the State and its economy. Lets make sure that our State roads are being built to serve our citizens and to make our economy the best it can possibly be.

As you can tell, we have a great deal of business ahead of us this year. I am proud of what we have accomplished in the last eight years and look forward to the next two years. I appreciate the confidence that you have placed in me by allowing me to serve as your Speaker again.

As Speaker, my pledge to you has always been the same. My door is always open to you. I will always try to be fair and impartial in my dealings with you. And I will always try to do my best in making this General Assembly one that every citizen in this State can be proud of.

My hat goes off to the football team at UT as it does almost every year to the Lady Vols. I congratulate them on their drive for perfection; for their thirst at being the best. And I say to you today, we should hold ourselves to no less of a standard. The best for our citizens is what we must strive for. I call on all of you today to join me as we work to meet that challenge.

Let's get to work.

Thank you.